

Often 20-minute breaks turns into 10, leaving little time to eat

The researchers wanted to examine the effect of lunch period length on students' food choices and intake. They looked at 1,001 students in six elementary and middle schools, with lunch periods ranging from 20 to 30 minutes, in a low-income urban school district in Massachusetts, as part of the Modifying Eating and Lifestyles at School (MEALS) study, a collaboration between Project Bread and Harvard Chan School. They analyzed the students' food selection and consumption by monitoring what was left on their plates at the end of the lunch period.

The researchers found that students with less than 20 minutes to eat lunch consumed 13 percent less of their entrées, 12 percent less of their vegetables, and 10 percent less of their milk than students who had at least 25 minutes to eat. While there were no notable differences between the groups in terms of entrée, milk, or vegetable selections, those with less time to eat were significantly less likely to select a fruit (44 percent versus 57 percent). Also, there was more food waste among groups with less time to eat.

Waiting in serving lines or arriving late to lunch sometimes left children in the study with as little as 10 minutes to actually sit and eat. The researchers acknowledged that while not all schools may be able to lengthen their lunch periods, they could develop strategies to move kids more quickly through lunch lines, such as by adding more serving lines or setting up automated checkout systems.

"We were surprised by some of the results because I expected that with less time children may quickly eat their entrée and drink their milk but throw away all of their fruits and vegetables," said Rimm. "Not so — we found they got a start on everything, but couldn't come close to finishing with less time to eat."

Jaquelyn Jahn, a master's student in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Harvard Chan School, was a co-author.

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